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The Great Unknown: The Negotiation and Narration of Death by English War Widows, 1647 – 1660*

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One summer's day in the year 1650 James Lotherington and Peter Belwood were mowing together in Lotherington's fields, near the village of Butterwicke in Cumbria. The conversation apparently turned to the return of John Weste, who had that day come home, unannounced and unexpected, from the wars. This was of particular concern to Belwood, for in his absence he had taken Weste's "widow", Audrey, as his wife. Lotherington claimed that he told Belwood that he would 'doe well to leave John Weste's wife for why should Belwood keep another mans wife'; to which Belwood apparently replied Weste 'could not have her for he and...Audrey were married', West having been away for about four years. [1] The exchange only survives on the historical record as part of a series of informations concerning Belwood and Audrey's dubious conduct that were given to the northern assize court in 1655. In her own deposition, Audrey defended her actions by saying that at the time of her supposed marriage to Belwood she had not heard from her first husband since he had gone as a soldier in 1643. [2] The predicament in which Audrey found herself illuminates several facets of the central question with which this article is concerned: How did the wives of soldiers navigate the complex problems posed by death during the internecine conflicts of the 1640s and 1650s? In particular, this paper will focus on the ways that women tried to navigate the tricky question of how they could know, or prove, that their husbands were dead, how they narrated these deaths, and some of the challenges they faced when, like Audrey Weste, they found that they had got it wrong.

Since the 1980s, historians have not only begun to reconsider some of the possible causes of the British Civil Wars, but also to explore the impact of the wars on British society. [3] The civil wars are now acknowledged to have been one of the most destructive conflicts in British history. Recent estimates suggest that as much as 7% of the population died in fighting or war related disease, and, in addition to the material political consequences of the wars, scholars have also begun to consider their effect on diverse populations, from injured ex-soldiers to Irish immigrants. [4] War widows have not been immune from this increased scholarly interest in the impact and afterlife of the wars. In particular, scholars have analysed these

women through the lens of the county war pension scheme, a system which, following an ordinance in May 1647, entitled women whose husbands had died in the service of parliament (as well as their orphans and the injured soldiers and mariners themselves) to apply to the local Justice of the Peace for a pension, to be considered at the next quarter sessions. [5] Focus has tended to be either on the empirical question of exactly who received money under this system, how much, and how this developed over time, or on the tactics that widows and soldiers used in their attempts to self-fashion themselves as a worthy cause for relief. [6] In an article focused on county provision for both war widows and maimed soldiers in Essex, David Appleby combines the two. He shows both the ways in which the awarding of pensions varied temporally (for example, parliamentary victories, such as the Battle of Worcester, apparently generated more generous pensions and gratuities) and also the tactics that applicants deployed in their petitions which proved most effective. [7] He argues that the most successful petitions, in monetary terms, featured ‘detailed information on the petitioner’s circumstances – family, health, poverty and sobriety’; thus, widows who received a pension (rather than a mere one-off gratuity) were three times more likely to have mentioned specific information about their children in their petitions. [8] Similarly, Geoffrey Hudson, in a study of English war widow petitioners throughout the seventeenth century, finds that while the relief Act of 1662 appeared to correspond with the 1647 ordinance – albeit royalists rather than parliamentarians were eligible to claim – the Restoration actually marked a ‘dramatic change’ in war relief, with widows being granted far fewer pensions than under the commonwealth regimes. [9] He suggests that this development reflected the hostile attitudes of many royalists to women more generally, arguing that the Restoration regime was keen to see the public, petitioning, quasi-assertive women of the revolution years returned to the firm control of their parishes and parish officers.

Illuminating as these studies are, surprisingly little sustained attention has been given to how these women confronted the very issue that united them: the death of a husband. In particular, how did women navigate the uncertainty that losing a husband in the wars could often produce, and, more generally, how did they narrate and interpret the death of their husband, perhaps at the hands of a fellow Englishman? Absentee husbands were not solely a product of the civil wars – in a petition from 1654, Ann Wheelock claimed that her want and necessity were the result of her being ‘utterly left’ by her husband who ‘though living in the county’ had not contributed ‘anything towards her reliefe’. [10] But it was a problem that was in many ways made more acute by the conditions of war, with many men away from home

(perhaps even serving abroad in Ireland or Scotland) for many years at a time, undertaking an intensely dangerous occupation and often with only very few lines of communication available. Not all women had the luxury (or, as we shall see, the inclination) afforded to the heroine of Greek mythology Penelope, who unstitched her tapestry each night ensuring that she could wait eternally for Odysseus' return. [11]

Drawing primarily on the first time petitions of 72 women from Lancashire and Cheshire who appealed to the county for relief between 1647 and 1660, this article will explore the strategies which women used to navigate and narrate the death (or presumed death) of their husbands in armed conflicts in England, Ireland and Scotland. [12] When utilising such petitions, it is important to remember that these narratives are not the unmediated voices of the women they purport to represent. Petitions were rarely written by the claimants themselves but rather with the help of a clerk or a scribe. Further, they were created with a clear purpose in mind: to elicit financial or material relief from county officials. Thus, to an extent, the language petitioners use and the stories they tell are tailored with this goal in mind. However, while accepting these cautions, the elements petitioners chose to narrate and the language in which they describe their experiences may still reveal much about how women interpreted and navigated the experience of losing a husband. As Mark Stoyke notes in his study of Royalist soldier petitions, scribes would have been forced to 'rely on claimants' own memories in order to draft those sections which related to the events of the war itself', [13] and petitioners were expected to attend sessions alongside their petitions; thus, accounts that strayed too far from a petitioner's own version of events may have proven problematic. Indeed, there are several petitions from both Lancashire and Cheshire that slip into the first person, implying that the petitioners themselves had a strong role in their articulation. [14] In any case, as Jonathan Healey notes, even if we accept that 'the extent to which these statements reflected the sentiment of petitioners is uncertain', they undoubtedly still possess historical value as evidence of what petitioners, and scribes, believed to be an effective and acceptable way to present the hardships of life and of war. [15]

This article is divided into three parts. The first section offers a brief overview of the relief system as it operated between 1647 and 1660 and goes on to consider the diverse ways in which widows in Lancashire and Cheshire attempted to prove the death of husband, the challenges they faced in doing so, and the ways in which they attempted to navigate the constraints posed by the relief system. The second section explores the language in which these widows described their husbands' death, and what this suggests about early modern

attitudes to death and loss more broadly. The third section considers the problems that the uncertainty of wartime deaths could present for women, and in particular explores the predicaments that confronted “phantom” widows – that is, women who had presumed their husbands to be dead, only for them to later return, `a la Martin Guerre, to their wives and habitations. [16] Taken as a whole, the article illuminates a little-studied dimension of female experience during this period, while at the same time contributing to our understanding of early modern mentalities more broadly, and, in particular, attitudes to death and civil war.

I.

The provision of relief for the poor by parishes was established in the Poor Law acts of 1598 and 1601. Though not the first attempt to formalise relief and provide a mechanism for its provision beyond the ad hoc benevolence of neighbours, these statutes continued to provide the basis of poor relief for the rest of the seventeenth century. [17] In May 1647, however, under rising pressure from the army, a further ordinance was passed stating that injured parliamentary soldiers, and the widows and orphans of dead parliamentary soldiers, could petition local justices for relief. Widows and orphans were entitled to apply for provision ‘over and besides such relief as they shall gain by their work and labour, and shall be allowed them by the charity and benovolence [sic] of the Parish, Town or Hamlet where they are settled’, though in practice demonstration of need was also a necessary feature of a successful petition. [18] To apply, the statute stated that widows should obtain a certificate from their husband’s captain or other commissioner officer and present it to the justices of the peace in their place of settlement, who would then order interim relief (if necessary) until their petition could be considered at the next quarter sessions. The only specified exception was if the captain or officer in question was dead, when the request of ‘persons of credit’ might suffice. [19] In 1651 a further Act was passed to provide for the victims of the conflicts in Ireland and Scotland. The stipulations of this act were somewhat tighter; within six months of petitioning widows had to procure a certificate not just from an officer, but from the ‘General, Major General or Commissioner General of the Army in which...the deceased husband...did serve’, with no exceptions. [20] Thus, in order to receive a widow’s pension women needed to provide proof of their habitation, their need, their husband’s loyalty, and also acceptable evidence that he was definitely dead. Of course, these acts did not preclude women who could not meet these requirements from petitioning the sessions on account of their general poverty, in which the absence of their husband may have been a significant contributory factor. Indeed, as we shall see, women who could not adequately substantiate their husband’s

death sometimes appealed to the county for ‘some mayntaynence’, couched in non-specific terms, utilising what evidence of death they could acquire and leaving the exact type of relief to the courts discretion. [21] In these more general cases, relief did not have to be provided in the form of a pension, and was perhaps unlikely to be as great if it was suspected that their husband might still be able to provide for them at some point in the future; thus, women had an incentive to prove, so far as they were able, that their husbands had definitely died in the parliament’s service.

For some women, the veracity requirements of the 1647 and 1651 acts did not prove problematic. In 1649, Elizabeth Clerke presented her petition to the Cheshire justices, stating that her husband had been killed in the parliament’s service at Holte Bridge, along with a certificate from his captain, John Leadbeater, confirming both her husband’s service and his death. She requested ‘some yearely mainetenance’ for subsistence ‘as others in the like case have afforded unto them’, and was awarded forty shillings per annum. [22] Similarly, in 1657 Margaret Knowlsey explained that her husband, Randle, had been in service for the commonwealth ‘againste the Comon Eninnye in the Island of Man for the space of five yeares in which service he dyed’ and that, as a result of his death, she required ‘some smale pension’ to be provided her. Alongside her petition was a certificate signed by Samuel Rose, confirming Randle’s service history, death and stating that he ‘behaved himselfe in the said service faithfully’. [23] Janet Heyes was quite explicit about her compliance with the requirements of the 1647 Act, stating that as a result of her husband’s death at the Battle of Worcester she desired ‘such contribution as the late Act doth provide’ and attaching the certification of George Malbon. [24] However, as even these correctly formulated petitions suggest, obtaining military certification of a man’s death was not a uniform procedure. While George Malbon simply signed and endorsed the bottom of Janet Hayes’ petition, Samuel Rose provided a separate sheet of paper that included a number of details of Randle Knowlsey’s service and loyalty. Such discrepancies hint at the diversity of ways that certifications could be obtained, most likely as a result of practical constraints. On those occasions where the petition itself was signed by a military officer, the officer in question was usually a local commander and thus, presumably, either present at the sessions or able to sign petitions on request. By contrast, obtaining a petition from a senior commander (as the 1651 Act dictated) would almost certainly have required having one sent from far afield, often from men who were still in service themselves.

The difficulties that women could face in acquiring acceptable certifications of death are made explicit in a series of petitions made to the Cheshire justices by Anne Haywood. Initially, Anne asked the justices to ‘assist her in securing a widows pension’, on account of the fact that her husband, a gunners mate at Chester castle, had been killed while in service, leaving her with four small children to maintain. Her petition was signed by Robert Duckenfield, one time commander of parliamentary forces on the Isle of Man and in 1653 one of Cheshire’s representatives in Barebone's Parliament. [25] However, Anne reappears in the rolls of the quarter sessions later that year, claiming that after ‘much charge and trouble’ she had now also obtained an order from the Lord Protector himself, requesting the justices of the peace not only pay to her a pension, but to backdate it to October 1650, the date of her husband’s death. [26] Clearly her initial petition and certification had proved inadequate, and she had been forced to seek confirmation via an alternative route. This is not the only occasion on which confusion over exactly who could confirm a death is evident; in a letter to the Cheshire quarter sessions dated 1651, William Daniell wrote that if a certificate under his hand and seal were not ‘satisfactory concerning the death of a souldyer’ he would in due course also send documents ‘from some of the Generall Officers of the Army’. [27] Given the timing of the letter, it is almost certain that Daniell was in the process of negotiating with the justices over the question of exactly whose certification was to be regarded as acceptable under the more stringent terms of the 1651 Act. However, in spite of this desire for clarity, some of the women who sought certification for their husband’s deaths in Scotland and Ireland continued to attempt to use relatively lowly commanders for verification, such as Captain Edward Barker (in the case of Cheshire) and Captain James Stopford (in the case of Lancashire).[28] Though the absence of order books makes it impossible to trace the outcome of these cases in Cheshire, it is suggestive that these women do not seem to appear in the Lancashire order books as recipients of a pension. [29] Furthermore, even on those occasions where justices, widows and commanders were agreed on whose certification was acceptable, practical problems of communication could still intervene. In a letter to the justices of the peace concerning the death of William Parker and the subsequent petition of his wife Anne, for example, Robert Duckenfield lamented that he ‘[knew] not what is become of his Highnes [i.e. Oliver Cromwell’s] letter touching this business but desire you will commiserate the condition of the said widdow and her foure children’. [30]

When we consider the very considerable difficulties that acquiring adequate certification of death could present, it is perhaps unsurprising that this was not the only way in which

petitioning women attempted to prove that their spouse had died. The most common alternative - perhaps because it was presented as acceptable alternative in the case of a dead commander, or perhaps because it was one commonly used in petitioning more generally – was to provide the signatures of local inhabitants who were willing to confirm the truth of the petition. In a small minority of cases, women resorted to this only because the officer in question really was dead. Elizabeth Dey, whose husband had served in Colonel Moore's regiment, presented her petition in 1657, seven years after Moore had died of a fever in Ireland. [31] Her petition requested relief, or failing that, 'yo[u]r w[o]r[shi]ps Certificate from the publique sessions of the truth [of her petition]' so that she could seek 'such reliefe at London as usually hath beene or is yeelided to widowes and fatherlesse children'. [32] Dey's petition reveals not only the problems that the need for verification of death could pose, and the ways that women sought to negotiate proof of death within the confines of the system, but also a high level of awareness of the petitioning process and its multiple layers of bureaucracy – for widows could also petition for relief from treasurers appointed by the state who discharged funds at the Cordwainer's Hall in London.[33] On other occasions, however, similar efforts at verification do not seem to have been prompted by the death of an officer. Margaret Whewall, whose husband was killed at Selby while serving under Colonel Bright, had 'inhabitants subscribing the truth' of her petition listed along the bottom. This was in spite of the fact that Colonel John Bright (who had led troops at Selby and was presumably the commander in question) lived until 1688. [34] That the sessions ordered Margaret should receive 50s per annum suggests that such efforts to negotiate proof of death could prove successful. [35] However, not all petitioners were so lucky. In 1648, Margaret Burrowes requested a 'penston out of the money allowed towarde the reliefe of widowes' and included signatories at the bottom of her petition affirming the truth of her account; but there is also a note in a different hand on the side of her petition quibbling about the whereabouts of her certificate, implying the justices had their reservations. [36] Interestingly, the men who signed their names to Alice Bache's petition for a yearly pension, following the death of her husband in Scotland, stated that 'wee whose names are subscribed have commonly heard it reported that the petitioners husband was slaine'. [37] This raises the intriguing question of precisely how the death of John Bache had come to be a kind of common knowledge, especially in the apparent absence of formal certification. The petitions suggest a few possible answers, and also reveal some of the diverse ways women may have come to know that their husband had died in the first place.

First, and most clear cut, some sick and badly wounded men returned home from the conflict for a brief period before their deaths. This was so in the case of Mary Hawkinson, who in 1652 described how her husband ‘being disabled from the said service Major John Duckenfield...gave him a Lett passe for England where soone aft his comeing over hee dyed of the said sicknes’. [38] Second, news could be brought back by soldiers returning from the wars themselves. Then, as now, most regiments (with the notable exception of the New Model Army) were organised geographically, meaning that men returning to their initial place of habitation were likely to encounter the wives of men with whom they had served. Ellen Jennings attempted to make good use of such witnesses following her husband’s death in Ireland, buttressing her petition requesting the apprenticeship of a child with the signatures of men who claimed to be ‘all witnesses to the death of Thomas Davis in [the] p[rov]ince of Munster under the command of Sir Charls Banister’. [39] Third, and most tentative, a man could simply have been away so long without any word that he was presumed likely to be dead. For the wives of these men, the regulations of the county widow’s pension system posed the greatest challenge, for without evidence of death (even the somewhat irregular evidence provided by women like Margaret Whewall) they were ineligible to petition for a pension. However, when the ad hoc charity of neighbours or the relief provided by the parish provided inadequate, these women did still petition the quarter sessions (though often for a ‘cottage’ or ‘reliefe’ or ‘maytenance’ or a ‘pension’, broadly couched, rather than the self-confident requests for a ‘penston out of the money allowed towarde the reliefe of widows’ made by some women with certification of death). Thus, in 1651 Mabell Greatrakes, her husband having gone to fight in Ireland, reported that ‘neither doth she know wheather he be alive or dead’; Elizabeth Primrose (1659) stated that her husband had gone to fight for the commonwealth ‘beyond the seas’ and that she did not ‘knoweth whether he be living or dead’; and Ann Gryme (1653) petitioned that her husband had been gone a soldier for long that she did ‘feare or suspect him to be dead’. [40] Perhaps in an effort to strengthen their case for relief in the light of such uncertainty, some women chose to emphasise the amount of time their husband had been gone – Mary Nuttell, for example, claimed that her husband ‘hath been this three yeares a souldier’. [41]

The varying amounts of detail that women provided in their petitions about their husbands’ wartime service and eventual death was perhaps in part the product of discrepancies in how and from whom a report of death was received. Certainly, the accounts of women whose husband died only after returning home tend to contain very specific details. Mary

Hawkinson, for example, who as we have seen above lost her husband at home from a wartime sickness, described her husband's service in considerable depth, stating that he had been:

'in Collonell Duckenfield his Regiment of ffoot in the Garrison of Chester [and] was one that was allotted and drawne forth of the said Regiment for the service of Ireland, wherein hee continued above one yeare under comand of Captaine Dene in Colloll Venables his Regim[en]t where the service being very hott and sharpe and all necessities very scarce, y[ou]r petitioners husband was brought into a weakenes and lingering sicknes whereof aft[er]wards hee dyed'. [42]

Mary's account of where her husband had served, under whom, and even of the difficult conditions in Ireland – both militarily and materially – suggest her husband had been well enough to describe to her in some detail the hardships he had suffered. Likewise, Janet Heyes narrated her husband's experience at the Battle of Worcester, where he was apparently 'cast down and many more of his fellowes accidentally fell upon him' his body being so 'sore bruised and crushed with the waight that it blackened'. [43] She knew this because he had been brought to her house afterwards where 'within a few dayes after [he] dyed'. Indeed, even when a man had been killed while away on duty, some women seemed to know precisely how their husband had met his fate. As Ian Atherton and Peter Morgan note, while gentlemen and noblemen may have expected that their bodies would be recovered to a church, non-elite men slain in war were rarely removed from the field and committed to a proper church burial, meaning it is very unlikely these women would have seen their husband's bodies at first hand. [44] Yet, in spite of this, Alice Earnshaw provided a gruesome description of the cause of her husband's death (he apparently had his arms blown off by a cannon), while Elizabeth Elcock stated that her husband had 'received such a hurt by a horse that hee dyed' while serving at the Battle of Worcester. [45] Such graphic accounts suggest that these women had received a fairly detailed version of events from someone who had been there to bear witness. By contrast, other petitioners, like Sarah Hudson, simply stated that their husband had been 'slaine in theire [the parliament's] service'. [46] In particular, the petitions of women whose husbands had died while away in Scotland or Ireland tend to contain only very scant geographic details, while the petitions of women who lost husbands in England are littered with references to specific battles and places. This may be the result of a dearth of information, with reports of death which had been communicated from outside England not specifying any further details; alternatively, it may suggest that women, when describing service far afield, in a foreign land, did not see specifying a particular location

within that unknown place as important. The latter interpretation is lent weight by the fact that, in spite of the high volume of soldier petitioners who claimed to have served outside England, there are no soldiers' petitions in the Lancashire or Cheshire records which refer to any place names from these countries. In this respect, the way in which these women described the loss of their husbands may have reflected not only the amount of information they had received, but also the Anglo-centrism of early modern English people more generally. Certainly the more venomous descriptions provided by petitioners, both male and female, were reserved for descriptions of the actions of the Scots - in 1651 a group of soldiers referred in their petition to the 'cruelty of the public enemy [meaning the Scots]', while Dorothy Owen referred to them as 'that great and potent enemy'. [47]

Thus, the women of Lancashire and Cheshire received news of, and attempted to prove, the deaths of their husbands in diverse ways. While some women did acquire the correct certification as specified by the 1647 and 1651 legislation, there were numerous challenges to doing so, and many women attempted to negotiate proof of death by other means, often bending more traditional petitioning techniques to their cause. The degree of detail that women provided about their husband's death could reflect differences in the way that news of a death was received, while many women never received a 'report' of death at all, leaving them in a particularly problematic position. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the ways in which these women presented the deaths of their husbands reflected not only informational constraints, but also their more general attitudes and priorities. It is to the language women petitioners used to narrate death, and to what this may suggest about early modern attitudes to death and loss, that this paper will now turn.

II.

It has been well-attested that soldiers throughout history have often been reluctant to recall the experience of combat and killing; as Mark Stoye notes, in this respect accounts of the British Civil Wars seem to share a kinship with those of more modern soldiers. [48] None of the soldier petitions from Cheshire or Lancashire during this period make reference to the act of killing or to the dead, whether they be comrade or enemy. Memoirs and diary accounts of the battles written by soldiers, while often describing troop movements in detail, tend to conform to the strictures of military memoirs as a genre – as such, when they do refer to killing, it is usually in such veiled or detached terms as 'gave them such a salute with shot' or 'fell upon the enemy'. [49] In this crucial respect, the accounts of war widows by definition

differ from the narratives of their soldier counterparts, for when petitioning widows had no choice but to refer at least one war death, singular: that of their husband. However they received the news and whatever their proof (or lack thereof), to petition as a widow these women needed to make some kind of reference to the loss of their husband. In this respect, their petitions offer a rare window into the ways in which the people of early modern England narrated and interpreted the deaths that inevitably accompanied over a decade of domestic war and conflict.

The most common descriptor that appears in the petitions is 'slaine'. [50] While in modern parlance this may carry connotations of butchery and treachery, in early modern England it was a word used to mean a death induced by external means more generally, and could be accidental as well as deliberate. In 1647 Lettice Doe described how her husband Henry had been 'by a rotten tree slaine', just as Margaret Seeley described her husband as having been 'slaine in the late warre'. [51] There is some evidence that women differentiated between death inflicted in the heat of battle and death that arose as a side effect of military service – in 1652 Jane Dobson stated that her husband 'was either slaine or dyed upon sicknes', showing that she made a clear mental distinction between the two – but, generally, women referred to their husband as being 'slaine' or having 'lost their lives' regardless of the actual cause of death. [52]

However, in addition, some women also chose to describe the death of their husband in the language of providence, using such phraseology as: 'itt soe pleased God that your said petitioners husband was slaine'; or 'there it pleased the Almighty god that your peticoners said husband was slaine'. [53] This is reflective of a wider tendency in early modern England to view worldly events as part of a God-given plan. Though this tendency was especially common among the more Puritanically minded, for the language of providence sat naturally with a desire to see evidence of predestination in day to day life, [54] it also had deep roots in more traditional Anglican religious culture. [55] Indeed, the use of providential language by widows to describe the death of husbands, in addition to revealing of how they chose to interpret and describe their losses, is also suggestive of the nature of popular providential thinking in this period more broadly. In a study of newsbooks reporting battles between 1570 and 1637, David Randall argues that the language of providence was deployed in two main circumstances: victories granted against the odds and lives saved by divine mercy. [56] Defeats, when spoken of at all, were given worldly causes or the language of 'fortune'. Thus, 'on the battlefield, providence did not speak of loss'. [57] He goes on to state that 'it is

reasonable to speculate that the providentialism of these battlefield newsreports played a role in forming providential preconceptions of [later, Civil War] Puritan soldiers'. [58] The evidence provided here suggests that this did not prove to be the case. Rather than mirroring exactly the patterns of providential language in newsbooks, restricting it to only happy occurrences, many widows chose to evoke providence when recalling the death of their husbands. It could perhaps be argued that Randall intended only to refer to the future use of providence by soldiers, not their widows. Yet the accounts of soldiers also recall unpleasant events and losses within a framework of godly intervention: Richard Clarkson of Ormskirk in 1652 explained how it 'pleased God to unfit your petitioner with a dangerous sicknesses and lameness', and James Ireland that 'it pleased god to visit him w[i]th Impostumes all over his body'. [59] Thus, that some women chose to narrate wartime deaths in the language of providence offers further support for the growing body of historical scholarship which argues that, far from being the preserve of Puritan zealots like Nehemiah Wallington, providence was a widespread and flexible interpretative framework that could be adapted and deployed by diverse people to a wide range of circumstances in mid-seventeenth century England. [60] At the very least, it was certainly a common way for relatively ordinary women to interpret an event that had left them materially, socially and, in many cases, emotionally battered – Alice Earnshaw was not the only widow to also narrate her 'griefe and sorrow' at her husband's passing. [61]

Not all widows were as providentially sanguine, however. There are a small number of women petitioners who refer to their husbands not as 'dead', or 'lost' or 'slain', but as 'murthered'. In mid-seventeenth century Britain, as now, the term 'murthered' was normative as well as descriptive; it implied an unjust, wrongful element to the infliction of death. Thus, when Elizabeth Dey says that her husband was 'cruelly murthered in the [said] towne' she is doing more than just describing him as dead – she is implying his death was some kind of moral wrongdoing. [62] In the Interregnum, this use of 'murther' in the context of war dead is most commonly found in sedition cases. For example, Richard Lee is reported in an information from 1657 to have called 'the Lord Protectore knave, traytor and murder, and [said] that the blood of those that were murthered in the late wars would be charged upon the Lord Protector'. [63] This renders the use of the term in the context of a war widow's petition somewhat ambiguous. Given that the victim in question was always a parliamentary soldier, was it simply the royalists who were the murderers? Or is it an oblique criticism of the cause of the war as a whole, and all those engaged in it? A closer look at the context of Elizabeth

Dey's case goes some way to providing an answer. The engagement in question was Prince Rupert's storming of the garrison of Liverpool, which was captured by the royalists following the infamous 'Bolton massacre' a month earlier. [64] The taking of Liverpool was reported to be equally bloody; the Prince apparently denied the defending soldiers quarter and instead had them killed, alongside many civilians of the town. As a result, it was portrayed in parliamentary newsbooks as evidence of the tyrannical and merciless nature of the royalists, and the 'pious Irish rebels' that fought for them. [65] Elizabeth herself was not from Liverpool but from Whitsun, and it is therefore likely that what we see here is her describing her husband's death through the lens of the maelstrom of parliamentary propaganda that described these engagements.

Margaret Burrowes, who also remembered her husband's death in normative terms, hailed from the village of Barthomley where her husband was in 'most outrageous and barbarous manner' killed by royalists while sheltering in St Bertoline's Church. [66] Like the Bolton Massacre this was an event that swelled to great import in the national press. A letter from the Royalist commander Lord John Byron describing how the royalists had put 'all to the Sword; which I finde be the best way to proceed with these kinds of people' was intercepted and published in a parliamentary newsbook, and it is this interpretation of the event as a royalist atrocity that has dominated both contemporary and subsequent scholarly accounts. [67] However, recent evidence unearthed by Geoffrey Hudson has cast doubt on the accuracy of this version of events. In particular, a letter dated 25 December 1643 (which provides the earliest account of the killings and tallies with later oral accounts) describes the event as an act of retaliation rather than cold-blooded killing, and thus implies that it could be sanctioned by contemporary codes of war. [68] If Hudson is right, this suggests that Margaret, despite her habitation in Barthomley and thus presumably her access to competing interpretations of events, also chose to describe her husband's murder through the lens of a narrative that was popularised in the parliamentarian press. These cases are revealing not only of the variety of ways women could choose to describe the loss of their husbands, but also of the influence propagandistic narratives could have on the accounts of individual women. War, like death, was a sad fact of life for the people of early modern England; but this did not mean that they would not speak in anger or distress when they had been led to believe that contemporary standards of just war had been transgressed.

III.

Thus far, then, we have explored some of the ways that women came to believe that their husbands were dead, the ways that they negotiated proof of death within the petitioning system, and the mental frameworks that guided their descriptions of their husbands' fates. However, as section I implied, for many women the death of their husband was less a certainty, and more of an educated guess. Besides negotiating for relief within poor law system, how else could these women attempt to cope with the challenges a missing husband could present, and with what consequences?

In some cases, women who had not certainly heard from their husbands one way or another could choose to go looking for them. This was a risky enterprise, for women travelling alone were easy targets for crime (especially if they had money), or could risk being taken for, or perhaps actually becoming, criminals themselves (especially if they did not). And without sure intelligence of where their husband was currently serving, the chances of success were bleak. In spite of this, the records of the northern assizes (which cover the counties of Yorkshire, Cumbria, Durham and Northumberland, as well as Lancashire) include cases which suggest that some women did go searching for soldier husbands. In 1650, Richard Staines of North Allerton, Yorkshire, described rather poetically the sight that greeted him in his house one night: 'a women in her smock being all in white', which 'afrighted' the soldiers that were quartered with him. The woman, Anne Norman, claimed to be from near Darnton in county Durham, around fifty miles away, and to be 'seeking her husband, who was a souldyer in the Parliaments service'. [69] It is possible, of course, that this story served Anne as a convenient explanation for why she was roaming the country alone; but even if this was the case, it at the very least suggests that enough women *were* doing so for it to be a believable falsehood. It certainly seems to have been the case for Elizabeth Kent, who in 1658 described how she went in pursuit of her missing husband (an adulterer and a drunk, rather than a soldier) and traced him all the way to Bristowe [Bristol]. The story did not end happily, for Elizabeth claimed that she was forced to share a bed with him and his lewd women. At this point, Elizabeth returned to Cheshire and to the quarter sessions to request that she 'bee free in a second choice of another' (better) husband. [70] In so doing, she demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the marriage and divorce procedures of seventeenth century England. The law held that marriage was for life, and even judicial

separation did not free a person for a new marriage. The only exception was the death or desertion of a spouse – in the latter case, re-marriage was allowed if nothing had been heard from the person for seven years, at which point they were presumed dead. [71]

However, as we have seen, in conditions of war death could prove uncertain, and Elizabeth Kent seems not to have been the only person attempting to play rather fast and loose with marital legislation. Rather than undertaking a dangerous voyage to look for a husband, some women decided to re-marry without adequate confirmation of their first husband's death, or without sufficient time having elapsed for death to be legally presumed. To return to the story with which this paper began, the latter appears to have occurred in the case of Audrey Weste, who in an information given in March 1655 claimed that she had been married to Peter Belwood by the minister John Bradley around six years after her first husband had gone to the wars. Indeed, the parson of her local parish of Barton, Christopher Sawnderson, stated that he had refused to perform this second marriage precisely because Audrey did not have adequate certification of John Weste's death. While the bigamists of seventeenth-century popular culture were usually men, and indeed often soldiers, with a wife in each county (and, as Bernard Capp has shown, this stereotype was not entirely erroneous) there were also cautionary tales that warned women against Audrey's fate, suggesting that it was not a wholly unfamiliar one. [72] For example, in the ballad 'A warning for married women' (1650) a woman who had promised herself to a man who was impressed to serve at sea 'three years for him staid/ expecting his coming home/ and kept herself a maid', until 'at last news came that he was dead/ within a Forraign land', whereupon the woman remarried. [73] She had not, however, seen the last of her sailor lover, for he later returned in spirit form to reclaim her as his own. Though the form the mariner takes makes his corporeal status somewhat ambiguous, the message was clear: women should remain loyal to their husbands away on military service, and be suitably cautious of reports of their death, lest similar fate should befall them.

However, the case of Audrey Weste is further complicated, and particularly intriguing, because it is not entirely clear that her mis-presumption of death was necessarily as accidental as it at first may appear. For her first husband, in his information to the court, claimed that he had sent a token to his wife with one James Hornsey of 4 shillings and four pence around two years before his return home in 1650, something which some of her neighbours apparently confirm [74] If this was indeed so, Audrey's claim that she heard nothing from her husband after his departure in 1643 begins to look a little doubtful. Perhaps realising the trouble she

was in, in a second information dated two months later Audrey instead claimed that someone (she does not specify who) had told her her husband was dead, and also that she had not heard from him for the (statutorily appropriate) seven years when Belwood became her suitor. [75] The truth of Audrey's intentions and the extent of her knowledge are, of course, impossible to know. Nevertheless, her case does raise the possibility that some women, far from being the victims of the ambiguities and confusions of war, actually tried to exploit them for their own ends. Husbands missing, presumed dead, perhaps offered a convenient opportunity for unhappy women to escape unhappy marriages, in addition to creating some accidental bigamists.

One woman who certainly appears to have found herself in the position of accidental bigamy was Alice Bockce, who in 1651 gave information to the assizes about her recent marriage to John Bockce, which had been rendered illegal by the reappearance of her first husband, Thomas Barton, whom she had married in 1641, now back from the wars and very much alive. In her defence, Alice stated that Barton had gone to Scotland to serve as a soldier and that shee:

‘hath not heard anything from him untill one Richard Naske of Skipton a soldier which was lately come out of Scotland and tould this examinant that hee was by and present when her said husband Thomas Barton was buried in Scotland soe that she could not expect any further helpe or comfort from him for that hee did helpe to lye him in his grave, now this examinant saith that she beleievinge his reposite to be true was shortly married unto one Thomas Bowcocke’. [76]

The minister who had performed the second marriage confirmed this account, stating that he had asked the couple to ‘be certaine’ that Barton really was dead, to which they apparently replied that a man had returned from Scotland who had been ‘by and present when he was buried’. [77] Apparently this (clearly false) evidence was enough not just for Alice and John Bockce, but for the minister too. Ideally, ministers were supposed to obtain some kind of official certification when a death was in doubt, before agreeing to perform a second marriage. Thus, one Mrs Middleton, who found herself married to a man who transpired to already have one wife, said she had asked for a ‘note under the Ministers hand...of her [the first wife’s] buriall’, and one minister in Audrey Weste’s case denied he had ever married her because they ‘could not tender certificate of the death’.[78] That the minister in the Bockce case had not sought any formal certification suggests that the conditions of ongoing internecine war served to create something of a system of compromise. Though there were standards of what constituted official verification of death, in marriage, as in poor relief, the

sheer number of men missing and dead, and the conditions of ongoing uncertainty that surrounded many of them, appear to have engendered a temptation to operate within the realm of likelihoods, rather than certainties. In the case of bigamous marriage, the law was uncompromising: “phantom” widows who had remarried another man were, like all bigamists, to return to their first spouse, and if found guilty by the courts could be punished further. [79] However, such strict legislation did not greatly assist those women who had to navigate life under the spectre of a missing husband. For these women, the effective negotiation and narration of death was of utmost importance, and the ways in which they chose to approach it could often conform more to the spirit than the letter of the law.

IV.

In many ways, then, the loss of a husband in war presented women with a multiplicity of problems in addition to material and emotional distress, and certainly more than have hitherto been explored. Even when a man was definitely dead, obtaining the correct certification of death for a war pension could be far from straightforward, while many more women were left in the uncertain position of suspecting their husband had died, but with little way of gaining certain proof. Even women who believed, or had been told, that their husband was dead could turn out to be mistaken, an error that was especially problematic for women who had since re-married. Study only of the legal provision for and guidelines surrounding war widows produces a beguiling picture of structure and certainty; by contrast, detailed study of the narratives of loss and death in the Lancashire and Cheshire petitions reveals something of the chaos, confusion and compromise created by war. However, as this study has also sought to emphasise, despite the many difficulties that could confront widows, “phantom” or otherwise, the ways in which women responded and the techniques they used to negotiate death were also diverse. From staunchly stating they had acquired all the necessary paperwork to be eligible for ‘provision in line with the late Act’, to bending traditional petitioning techniques, to engineering new marriages, women navigated the problem of death in diverse ways. Though undoubtedly victims of the war, these women were active in shaping their own futures and fates too. To some extent, they were aided in this by a corresponding spirit of compromise amongst local officials, if not in the law. Re-marriages were performed even in the absence of certain death, and ‘common knowledge’ of death could, in practical terms, be enough to ensure sympathetic treatment within the relief system. When narrating death, women could integrate tropes from the national popular press in their accounts, presenting enemy actions as atrocities and mirroring parliamentary hostility to the Scots. Such

evidence not only suggests the influence and reach of the popular press in the period, but also hints at early modern attitudes to civil war deaths more generally; providence, for example, was a popular framework within which to narrate and interpret the losses of war. The experiences of the widows in this study are not, of course, representative of the experiences of all war widows; the wives of major commanders, or of royalists, doubtless had their own hurdles to navigate, from settling estates to dealing with the Committee for Compounding. They do, however, suggest much about the complex, varied experiences - and responses - of poor, northern, parliamentary war widows. For these women, the impact of war did not begin and end with losing a husband; rather, this marked the start of a complex sets of negotiations and decisions, the results of which could have as much impact on their future destiny as the initial loss of a spouse.